Romantic Strife in the 1870s

By: Dale C. Maley
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One of the many unsolved historical mysteries from the Fairbury area concerns a romance that soured in the 1870s.

This story began with the birth of Christopher Gschwind in Germany. At the age of 20, in 1857, Christopher emigrated from Germany to America. Most people who migrated from Europe to America chose to come to New York City. German immigrants in that era often chose the New Orleans port for its unrivaled access to the American Midwest via river transport, more accommodating local policies, established German communities, and economic shipping options, as well as the desire to reach interior agricultural regions without first settling in eastern coastal cities. Several Fairbury area families chose to emigrate to New Orleans for these reasons.

Christopher started farming in Cropsey Township. Eight years later, in 1865, Christopher's brother Johann Jacob Gschwind emigrated from Germany to New York City. Jacob traveled from New York to the Cropsey area to join his brother in farming. By the time of the 1870 U.S. Census, Christopher and Jacob owned a farm worth $2,000 near Cropsey. This amount would be equivalent to $50,450 in today's dollars. Christopher Gschwind was 33 years of age in 1870.

The Apostolic Christian church began in the state of New York. Very quickly, new churches developed in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, and other states. In 1984, Perry A. Klopfenstein published his book titled ***March to Zion***. In his book, Klopfenstein details when and how each new Church developed in the United States. By the 1870s, the North and South Side Apostolic churches were first founded in the Fairbury area.

In October of 1874, Christopher decided to marry Pauline Frike in Livingston County. Christopher was 37 and Pauline was 19 years old when they married. They began their married life on Christopher's 120-acre farm in Section 24 of Cropsey Township.

Between about 1853 and 1860, all the farmland in the Fairbury area had been claimed and purchased from the U.S. government for $2.50 per acre. After 1860, farmland had to be bought at a higher price from the original landowners.

In the 1870s, members of the Apostolic Church started to emigrate westward to Kansas. These early settlers were attracted to Kansas because farmland was available at relatively low prices. One of the first Apostolic Christian settlements in Kansas was located in Coffee County, near the present-day town of Gridley, Kansas.

Just six months after he had married Pauline Frike, Christopher Gschwind decided to emigrate from the Cropsey area to Gridley, Kansas. On March 22, 1875, Christopher and his wife, Pauline, sold their 120 acres in Section 24 of Cropsey township to Christian Straisser of Peoria County for $1,989.

Christopher left his newlywed wife in the Fairbury area while he traveled to Kansas to start farming. After being in Kansas for about six months, Christopher contacted his young wife back in the Fairbury area and asked her to join him in the Gridley, Kansas area. Since there were no telephones in that era, he likely communicated with his wife by U.S. mail or telegraph.

Christopher's young wife replied and said she was not coming to Kansas because she was taking a new job in Peoria. After a few more months in Kansas, Christopher returned to the Fairbury area, looking for his wife. He was shocked to find that she had moved in with a married man in Saybrook. That man had lived in Fairbury before moving to Saybrook, and the Blade reported that he was well-known to the community during his time in Fairbury. Unfortunately, the Blade never revealed the married man's name in its July 14, 1876, article.

The Blade also reported the married man had sent his wife and children to live with his parents while he set up house with Pauline Gschwind in Saybrook. Christopher Gschwind immediately placed two successive ads in the Blade, stating that he was no longer responsible for his wife's debts.

Christopher Gschwind returned to his farm near Gridley, Kansas. He never married again and died at the age of 68 near Gridley, Kansas. His obituary was published in the August 31, 1905, Burlington Kansas Republican newspaper.

The obituary reported that Mr. Gschwind lived alone on his farm about five miles southwest of Gridley. The morning he died, Mr. Gschwind had a couple of interactions with the two Schwibald brothers, who were hired hands on his farm. Mr. Gschwind told them he was going into his house to shave, and he would see them later that day.

The two brothers began digging a new well for Christopher Gschwind. A few hours later, they returned to Mr. Gschwind's house and found him dead in his yard, a short distance from his front door. The funeral was held at the local German Church.

The obituary recounted the story of Mr. Gschwind becoming separated from his wife in Illinois shortly before he began farming in the Gridley area. The obituary recounted that throughout his life in Kansas, he lived a lonely and peculiar life. He was greatly interested in horticulture, and his farm was stocked with orchards of every variety of fruit trees adapted to the local climate. He was scrupulously honest and also quite an extensive reader, with his house well-stocked with newspapers. He only had one friend, a Mr. Adam Schif. Mr. Schif's wife was a cousin of Mr. Gschwind.

Extensive genealogical research has been unable to determine what happened to Pauline Frike–Gschwind and Christopher's brother, Jacob Gschwind, after the marriage ended. Neither of them shows up in any of the U.S. Census reports after the marriage ended. The identity of the married man in Saybrook has also not yet been discovered.

Christopher Gschwind’s obituary stated that he lived a "lonely and peculiar life" throughout his time in Kansas. In retrospect, he did not make a good decision when he left his 20-year-old, newlywed wife alone in the Fairbury area while he went to Kansas.

It is also odd that Mr. Gschwind's obituary did not mention his brother Jacob, with whom he farmed in Illinois. Perhaps his brother Jacob ran off with Christopher's newlywed wife, and they changed their names to avoid being discovered. The mysteries around this story may be solved someday.

Christopher Gschwind was likely very surprised to read a letter from his newlywed wife stating that she was refusing to travel from Fairbury to Kansas to join him on his new farm.